How to Keep Your Blood Pressure Healthy

Blood pressure is the force that drives blood through your veins and arteries. If that force becomes too high - like the pressure of water rushing through the garden hose when the tap is turned on full - it can cause serious harm to the heart, brain, kidneys and eyes.

This is why it's so important to keep blood pressure at a healthy level. If it becomes too high it can damage arteries, making it easier for them to become blocked. If a blockage happens to an artery supplying blood to the heart, for instance, it can cause a heart attack. But if it happens in an artery to the brain, it can cause a stroke - a sudden brain injury which may permanently or temporarily affect movement and speech.

How can you tell if you have high blood pressure?

The only way is to ask your doctor to check it for you regularly. The serious effects of high blood pressure usually develop only after it has been high for a number of years - in the meantime, there are no symptoms to warn you. But regular checks mean it's possible to detect rising blood pressure before it does any damage. Regular checks are especially important for people who have a family history of high blood pressure.

Who should be concerned about their blood pressure?

Everyone. By knowing how to prevent high blood pressure, adults of all ages can reduce their risk of heart disease and stroke.

How is high blood pressure treated?

Some people need medication to control blood pressure. But sometimes it's possible to lower blood pressure just by changing habits - losing weight, eating a healthier diet, being more active and reducing the amount of alcohol you drink.

How can I prevent high blood pressure?

Again, by making changes to your lifestyle. If you're overweight, begin by losing some extra pounds. A low fat diet based on plenty of vegetables, fruit, bread, legumes, rice, pasta and other grains, and moderate amounts of fish, poultry, lean meat and low fat dairy products makes it easier to lose weight or to stay at a healthy weight.

Regular exercise is important for both weight loss and preventing high blood pressure generally. Thanks to cars and labor saving gadgets, we've become used to thinking that movement is an inconvenience. But any opportunity to be active, whether it's walking, weeding the garden, doing housework or taking the stairs instead of the elevator is a way of improving health.

Should I eat less salt?

Too much salt in the diet may also contribute to high blood pressure. Most people eat far more salt than they need - this is because many foods, especially fast foods, snack foods and processed foods from the supermarket contain a lot of salt. But it's not difficult to eat less salt if you eat more fresh food and choose products labeled "low salt or "no added salt". Don't add salt at the table and reduce the amount you use in cooking. If you're used to adding a lot of salt, try cutting down the amount you use gradually. Add extra flavor by using more herbs, spices, lemon juice, garlic, fresh ginger or chili.

What about smoking?

Although smoking doesn't increase blood pressure it can add to the harm caused by high blood pressure, and increase the risk of stroke and heart disease as well as many other health problems. Once you stop smoking this extra harm is soon reduced.

What about alcohol?

Too much alcohol contributes to high blood pressure. However there's evidence that drinking a moderate amount of alcohol - one to two standard drinks a day - may help prevent diseases like stroke and heart disease.

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